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The Story

OF

JOHN HLYNN.

A Narrative

OF

Cruelty, Suffering and Wrong
Rarely Paralleled.

As Related by Himself.

PRINTED FOR THE AUTHOR:
1893.

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ADDRESS JOHN FLYNN, ENGLISHTOWN, N. J.

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PREFACE.

The following is the pitiful and entirely true story, simply told, of one who from neglect that was little if anything short of criminal in those to whose care he was confided in his early youth, was doomed to a life of affliction seldom paralleled in the history of human suffering. When but a little boy death and poverty deprived him of the loving care of his parents, and falling into the hands of an employer who appears to have been destitute of the ordinary feelings of humanity, cruel punishment and exposure at a period of his life when he was least able to bear it, threw him upon a bed of sickness from which he recovered only to find himself an incurable cripple. With an active mind and with the knowledge that came to him as his mind matured that he inherited a strong and healthy body, he has been confined to his bed and compelled to lie in one position for over thirty-four years.

Good people who may read this sad history—you who cannot endure for long any one position without fatigue, or even for a few minutes without remonstrance—imagine, if you can, the sufferings, mental as well as physical, of one who has been compelled to lie without change of position for half of an ordinary lifetime, and whose vigorous constitution gives indication that he may survive for another period as long. Think of the tiresome monotony of such a life, even when surrounded by kind relatives and friends, cheered by their presence and sustained by their cheerful conversation and hopeful encouragement, supplied with entertaining books and periodicals, and enjoying all the comforts that can be furnished by a christian home and the attentions of christian friends, and then think what this man has suffered, not as the result of any imprudent or criminal act of his own, but because of the cruel neglect of those who were by all the laws of humanity as well as by the laws of God and of the State bound to protect and defend him in his helpless infancy.

The history was written at the request of a friend who desired to secure the facts during the lifetime of the subject from the one

most competent to give them, and not with any idea of publishing them in the present form. Subsequently it was suggested that as the story was an interesting one, and as the subject of it had been prevented, recently, from earning money, which at one time he was enabled to do, for the purpose of providing himself with little comforts and necessaries, the sale of this sad history might supply the loss occasioned thereby. For this purpose it is offered to the kind consideration of a christian and charitable public, who will in the purchase of the work contribute to the comfort and happiness of an unfortunate and helpless fellow creature, and at the same time win the plaudit that "inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

The writer hereof, to whom was assigned the task of editing the manuscript, desires to say that he has aimed to preserve the original language of the author, and indeed found little in it to change. The task, which has been one of love, has been mainly that of arranging in regular sequence or order the several points of the narrative.

March 4, 1893.

THE STORY OF

JOHN FLYNN.

I was born in the city of New York about the middle of August, 1848, as I reckon from the record which will appear hereafter in these pages. This record was made, as I suppose, from statements by my dear mother at the time. My parents came from Ireland to this country. My father was a cooper by trade and resided in the city of New York. He was very poor. He died in 1854, leaving my mother with three small children—myself, and my brother and sister—to look after and care for. My mother was so poor that she could not support or take care of us, so she was obliged to put me and my brother in the institution for poor children on Randall's Island. This was on the 17th of April, 1855. She kept my sister with her at her home in New York.

I had a good home at the institution on Randall's Island, and had the best of care while I was there, but I had not been there but a little while when word was brought to me that my poor dear mother was very sick and could not live a day longer. Oh, this was sad, very sad news for me to hear, but it was still harder for me to know that neither my brother nor myself could go to see my dear mother before she died, or even go to her funeral.

I was now left an orphan to the cold charities of the world, with neither relatives or friends to look after me.

I had been on Randall's Island nearly two years when a farmer living near Hightstown, New Jersey, came to the

institution to get a boy to work for him. He picked me out from among the other poor boys there and I was bound as an apprentice to him, in the usual form, he promising to provide for me, treat me kindly and teach me the farming business, and the officers of the Institution promising for me that I would be diligent and obedient. This was one of the saddest days of my life, for I was taken away from my dear brother, who was the only relative then that I had any knowledge of. When the farmer was about to take me away my brother put his arms around my neck and would not let him part us, but we had to be separated and the farmer took me away with him.

This man lived on a large farm, but I soon learned that he had no feelings of sympathy in his heart for a poor orphan child. He was not good to me. He used me like he did his dumb beasts, if not worse. All the time I lived with him I never knew what it was to lie in a warm bed or to have warm clothes on my poor body. My bed, winter and summer, was a sheep-skin upon the bare floor and a horse blanket was my only covering. I had no change of clothing, either, and in rainy or stormy weather I would get my clothes wet, and would have to lie down on the cold floor with my wet clothes on. Many and many were the nights that I cried myself to sleep with the cold. They never gave me half enough to eat, either, and often I was so hungry that I took crusts from the swill-pail and ate them to stop the hunger-pain in my stomach.

I have to stop here and wipe the tears out of my eyes before I can write any more. It makes me feel sad whenever I think of the miserable life that I led at this time. As God will judge me, I write nothing here but the truth.

On one occasion my employer nearly whipped me to death for no fault of my own. What he punished me for was this: His cows got out of the pasture-field one day, and just at night-fall he sent me to look for them and bring them home. I went and after looking for them came

back and told him I could not find them. This made him angry, and he told me to go and look for them again, and that I should not come into the house that night if I did not find them. By this time it was quite dark, and I was afraid in the woods after dark; so I wandered about from place to place, but I could not find the cows. When at last I went back I was afraid to go into the house and tell him that I could not find the cows, so I went to the barn and got up into the mow of the cow house and laid there until morning.

It was on a Saturday night when the cows strayed away. The next morning my employer came up into the mow to get some hay for the horses. I was still asleep and did not hear him until he was standing right by me. When he saw me he picked me up and threw me out of the cow-house window. The fall hurt me so badly that I could hardly get up. Then he took me into the barn, tied me with a rope and whipped me so hard that my poor body was sore from the effects of it for weeks afterwards.

I was almost in despair before he got done whipping me. I think when he threw me out of the cow-house that he hurt my spine, for every little while, for more than a year afterwards, I would have a sharp pain in my back.

I often think of my sufferings and griefs at this time, and pray that God will have mercy upon poor orphan children who are left to the mercy of the world, and to soften the hearts of cruel or unthinking masters and mistresses. Many times I went away from my cruel master and tried to get away on the cars at Hightstown to get back to Randall's Island, where at least I had kind treatment, and enough to eat, and a comfortable place to sleep at night; but every time that I got on the cars the conductor would put me off because I had no money to pay my fare to New York, and then I would have to go back to my employer and he would whip me cruelly for going away.

So I lived with this man until he gave up farming and

moved away. As he did not want to take me with him his wife told me, one day, that if I wanted to go away I could go whenever I pleased and where I pleased. I thought if I could only get back to the institution at Randall's Island I would be happy; and happy would it have been for me if I could have done so, for then I would not have been thrown upon this bed of affliction, where I have been laid helpless for so many long and tedious years. But I was glad to get away from the place where I had been treated so badly and suffered so much. I was afraid of my employer, and in dread always, after he threw me out of the cow-house window.

I did not know where to go, but I gladly left my heartless master. I wandered about through the country from place to place trying to find some one who would take pity on me and let me live with them. I was little boy, did not know anybody, and did not know the country. I did not know one road from another after I got away from my master's place. It was in the winter time when I went away. There was snow on the ground a foot deep. My shoes were nearly worn out, and I had no stockings. As I wandered from place to place I asked at every farmhouse I came to if they wanted a boy, but they all said no.

When it came night, the first day I was out on the road, I went into a small house along the roadside and asked the people there if they would let me stay all night. The woman of the house took pity on me and let me stay. The next morning a man came along the road and the woman went out and asked him if he did not want a boy to work for him. So the man when he saw me took pity on me too, and took me home with him.

When I got to his house it was found that in my wanderings through the snow the day before I had frozen every toe on my feet, and for a long time after that I could hardly walk. I lived with this man six months. He did not want me any longer, but he told me where I

could get another place. So I went to this new place and lived there four years.

At this new place the people at first treated me kindly, but the last two years of my stay they were not good to me. After I had lived with them a year I was taken with rheumatism in my legs so that I could hardly walk about. Every time that there was a storm I would have great pains in my legs, and the joints would be stiff so that I could not move them. If I was sitting in a chair I could not get up without great difficulty. When the storm would be over I would feel better and the stiffness would go out of my joints. But the rheumatism kept getting worse, until at last I could not walk at all without a crutch to hold me up. This went on so for nearly a year, and then I had to use two crutches.

Oh, what great sufferings I had during these times. I was sick nearly all the time. I suffered for the want of care and suffered for want of medical aid. I had no doctor, and had nothing done for me all the time I was in this condition. I could hardly get about on my two crutches, and yet I was expected to work and do things that it was hardly possible in my condition for me to do. Sometimes I was so weak and sick that I could hardly walk at all, and at last got so bad that when I was down I could hardly get up, and then my employer took me to Clarksburg and gave me up to the overseer of the poor.

It was in the Fall when I was put under the charge of the overseer. The next Spring the township committee met. They did not want the burden of my care, and after finding out that I was born in New York they concluded that my legal residence was in that city and that they would send me back there. So they employed a man to take me to New York and leave me at the Alms House.

When the man took me to New York I was so ill that I could hardly walk. He took me over on the Matawan steamboat. This was on a Friday night. The next morning he told me to stay on the boat until noon while he

went up into the city to transact some business, and then he would come back and get me. So at noon he came back and took me up into the city. It was a very cold day. There was snow on the ground. I felt so sick and weak that I could hardly walk on my crutches. When we got up into the heart of the city he said to me: "We will now go into this store and get warm." So I went into the store with him, and after we had sat there for awhile by the stove he said to me: "You sit here until I come back. I am going out on the street a little while, and I will be back and get you, and take you then to the Alms House." So I sat there by the stove waiting for him to come back. I sat there until nearly night, but he did not come. Then the storekeeper came to me, put his hand on my shoulder and said to me: "Little boy, you must go home. You have been here nearly all the afternoon." So I told him how I came to be there, and my circumstances and condition. Then he went across the street and came back with a policeman. The policeman asked me where the man was going to take me, and I told him the story. This was on Saturday night. The policeman then took me to "The Tombs," as the city prison of New York is called.

I did not see the man who brought me to the city any more. When the policeman left me at the Tombs I was put into a cell and the cell-door was locked on me. There was nothing in the cell but a wooden bench. The door was iron and the walls were stone. There was nothing for me to lie down upon or to sit on but the wooden bench. While I was there I had to lie upon this bench at night with no bed-clothing to cover me. It was very cold and I suffered a great deal with the cold and with the pain in my limbs, so that I could not sleep. I suffered so much that I could not eat anything while I was there, except two little crackers that I sent out and had bought for me.

I was kept in the Tombs until Monday morning. When

they came for me at 10 o'clock, that morning, I could not move my legs, nor stand up nor walk one step. My legs were stiff and pained me very much, from lying in the cold cell with no bed but a bare wooden bench and no bed-clothing to cover me at night. In consequence I took a very heavy cold and it made my rheumatism worse. So they had to carry me in their arms to the wagon that was to take me to the Alms House.

When we arrived at the Alms House the head man of the place questioned me as to where I came from and how I came to get there, and I told him the story of my adventures. After hearing it he decided that my legal residence was in the township in New Jersey from whence I had just been taken. That I had been away from the Institution at Randall's Island long enough to acquire a residence elsewhere, and that my legal residence was where I had served as an apprentice. He decided to send me back to New Jersey. He also said it was a very wrong thing for the policeman to put one in my condition in the Tombs, but he said it was the custom when any one was found on the streets at night with no home to go to, to put them in the Tombs until morning. So he wrote something on a piece of paper and gave it to a man in attendance and told him to take me and put me on the Amboy boat and give the piece of paper to the Captain of the boat. I did not know what was written on the paper. They were sending me back to Millstone township.

I could not walk one step, so that wherever they took me they had to carry me in their arms. When we got to Amboy the Captain of the boat took me in his arms and put me in the cars for Hightstown.

It had been a very sorrowful day for me. I was very ill all the way from New York. The cars reached Hightstown just at nightfall. I was carried from the cars into a hotel. I asked the landlord of the hotel to take me down to Clarksburg that night. He asked me if I would not stay until morning and said he would take me then. I

told him that I felt so badly that I did not think I would live till morning. So he sent me down that night, and I was left with the overseer of the poor of the township.

But this was not the whole of my adventures that night. The man who brought me from Hightstown had a sore on his right hand and so had to guide the horse with his left hand. The day before there had been a very heavy rain, and a bridge across a ditch about a mile from Clarksburg had been washed away. When we arrived at the ditch it was so dark that the driver did not see that the bridge was gone. The horse jumped over the ditch but the wagon fell into it. When the wagon went down the jolt hurt my back and I fainted. When I came to myself the driver had got the wagon on to the road again. I was suffering great agony from the pain in my back. When the wagon jolted into the ditch it must have caused another injury to my spine or revived the old one, which I received when my employer threw me out of the window of the cow-house.

When we reached Clarksburg I was lifted out of the wagon and carried into the hotel and seated in a chair. Here I must have fainted again, for I did not know anything more until the next day in the afternoon. When I came to myself I was up stairs and in bed. I was so ill that they did not think it was proper, for over a week, to move me.

When at last I had recovered so that they thought they could safely move me, the overseer of the poor came and took me away about three miles from Clarksburg, and I was put to board with a family with whom the overseer had bargained to keep me for a weekly allowance to be paid by the township, such being the custom in that part of the country of caring for the helpless poor. So this family took charge of me and nursed me, and after I had been there with them two months I could go around on my crutches. During that Summer I got quite smart, but as soon as Fall came and cold weather set in again

my joints became stiff, the pains came back in my legs, and I got so that I could hardly get up when I was down.

So the illness continued for a while until one day when I was trying to exercise myself by walking with my crutches outside of the house, one of my crutches slipped and I fell. I could not get up and the man I lived with came out, picked me up, carried me into the house and laid me on my bed.

That was the last time that ever I was on my feet to attempt to walk.

For more than thirty years I have been lying upon the bed of affliction.

From the day on which I fell and was carried in and laid upon my bed my rheumatism got worse, cramps set in along with it and drew my poor legs almost double, and no pen can describe nor tongue tell the terrible pains that I suffered for years afterwards. How many times in my agony I begged and prayed for death to relieve me of my awful sufferings my Saviour only knows. At last the pains and cramps left me, but left me with my legs warped out of shape and useless, and my body in a condition of helplessness never to be cured while this life lasts. I was taken down upon my bed when I was only about thirteen years old, and since that time one-half of my body has rested upon my back and the other half upon my right side, my legs drawn almost double, and my feet and toes out of all natural shape. It would make almost any one's heart ache to see what a condition my poor body has been reduced to, and to reflect upon the position in which I am forced constantly and without change to lie. You that have kindly hearts and sympathies that are easily awakened by the tale of distress or at the sight of suffering, will feel sorry for me, but you can never know what it is to lie on a bed of affliction such as mine has been. Only those who have suffered in like manner can to any adequate degree realize the long drawn out suffering, the almost hourly agony of despair that

would welcome death as a happy release, only to sleep and wake again to the hourly despair and to hope daily for the death that never comes to heal the crippled, miserable body.

But while it is true that I have not sat up in my bed, or changed the position of my body for over thirty-four years, and know that as long as I live I shall have to remain in the same position and suffer as I have done, yet I can be thankful to my God that I have been spared the use of my arms and hands and of my eye-sight. It is hard to be deprived of most of the earthly comforts and enjoyments that are accorded to nearly all of God's creatures, yet I can praise him that he has given me a mind to appreciate and enjoy his wonderful works, and to read and understand his revealed Word. And so while my lot in this life is a very sad one and my sufferings have been great, yet I am enabled through His grace and mercy to be reconciled to my sad lot, if it is His will that I shall lie upon this bed of affliction for thirty years more. I have a Christian's hope for a future life of happiness, and I can well afford to suffer here if I may enjoy the glory of the hereafter. I know that for all my trials and sufferings here in this world the brighter will be my crown in heaven, and I am happy in Christ, for my peace is made with God. A mansion is prepared for me, and I am only waiting until my Saviour shall call me to meet him on the other side of the dark river.

I read God's holy Word and it gives me great comfort. I find it a means of grace and strength to my heart and soul. Sometimes I think that He keeps me on this bed of affliction for an example of patience and faith to others as well as to try mine, and I try to be a hero and endure it with resignation. The story is often related, in order to encourage us, of the bravery of Christians in the hour of death. I once heard the story of a very distinguished man who was on his death-bed. He was a true Christian. Feeling that he had only a few moments more to live he

sent for his family that he might give them his farewell words. His soul was filled with holy joy and his face lighted up with a smile as he told them to cease their weeping and see how a Christian could die. That was a brave thing to do, but sometimes it seems to me that it requires more courage to lie on the bed of affliction to which I have been confined and be able to keep a smile on my face and a cheerful heart in my bosom, as I endeavor with God's help to do. I am waiting for the day when Christ, the Divine Surgeon, shall with his touch heal the sufferings of this poor body and make straight and whole these crooked and withered limbs. I never cease praying for fellow-sufferers who like myself, by the providence of God have been shut in.

Since I have been afflicted I have taught myself to knit, to do crochet work and laces. Some of my work has been commended as very beautiful. Some years ago I took the first premium at the Monmouth County Fair for my knitting work. For several years I was able to earn some money by knitting and selling tidies and other things, with which I purchased medicines and little necessary things for my bodily comforts, but for the last six years I have not been able to knit much because my eyes became so weak that the physician said I must stop or I would become blind. I knit sometimes but I soon have to stop because it makes my eyes ache very much.

I have also learned to read and write since I became afflicted, and about my only comfort and pleasure now is in reading. If I could not read I do not know what I should do, for it so helps to pass away the sad and lonely hours. Kind friends occasionally send me newspapers, which are a great comfort to me and for which I am very grateful.

During all the years after I parted from my sister and brother, as related in the beginning of this story, I never heard, down to a recent time, a word from them or learned where they were, although I had frequently, dur-

ing that time, advertised for them in the newspapers. The last time that I put an advertisement in the newspapers, was about six years ago. The following is a copy of it:

TO THE PUBLIC.—The undersigned, a helpless invalid, having been confined to his bed for a number of years, living among entire strangers, wishes to learn the address of his brother and sister, residing at last accounts in the city of New York. Their names are MARTIN FLYNN and MARY FLYNN. Any one knowing anything of either of them will confer a great favor by sending such information to the subscriber. Address

JOHN FLYNN,
Englishtown, Monmouth County, N. J.

☞ Other papers please copy.

Then I thought I would write to the officers of the institution at Randall's Island, and they sent me a copy of the records from which I learned that my father's name was PATRICK FINN, born in county Wexford, Ireland, and my mother's name was CATHARINE EARLY, born in the same county. That their children, MARTIN, aged 9 years and 10 months, and JOHN, aged 7 years and 9 months, were given in charge of the institution by their mother, who was unable to support them, on the 17th of April, 1855. The records also show that JOHN was apprenticed to a farmer in Monmouth county, N. J., on January 12th, 1857, and MARTIN to another farmer in Bergen county, on the 8th of September of the same year. This letter from the institution was dated on the 26th of June, 1884. Up to that time I had always thought that my name was FLYNN, and I still think that a mistake was made in the record. However, it was the means of finding my brother about two years afterwards. I traced him to Bergen county. It was a happy meeting. He had been a soldier in the war with the South, had served his time in the army and had received an honorable discharge. After the war he had married and when we met he had a wife and eight children to support and was in very poor circumstances; but it was a comfort and joy to us both to meet again. It also gave us hopes that we will yet find our dear sister, of whom we have heard nothing since we were separated when my mother took us to the institution.

I will now bring this sad history to a close. Those who have read it thus far will see that my afflictions were all brought on by the hand of man. If I had had proper care and medical attention when I was a boy and was first taken down to my bed I could have been easily cured. Or after that, when I became so ill, and was yet young, if I had been sent to some medical institution I might have been restored to health and outgrown all my injuries; but now no power on earth can help me. Oh, it is hard to think that when there was hope for me in this world, and that my poor body might have been saved from this great affliction, that I could not have it!

But through all my life's suffering, sorrow and trial I see the loving, gentle, guiding hand of our Father above, and I am learning more and more how sweet it is to trust in Jesus. My soul is happy in a Saviour's love. I am cleansed and saved by His precious blood. I am filled with thanksgiving for His numberless mercies, and I am clinging to His blessed promises for all I need in the future. What a mighty consolation to sad and sorrowing ones that we have a friend in Jesus. How sweet to look up and say: "Thy will be done," and to feel and know that our steps are ordered of the Lord. That any and every little event of each day is planned for us by a loving Father. All this is cause for daily thanksgiving. But when we look beyond these fleeting years of pain and sorrow to the rest in those beautiful mansions above, our souls are lost in rapture; when our last words of cheer have been all spoken—when our last line has been written, and we come to enter in at the pearly gates to the city of our King—then shall the everlasting thanksgiving be upon our lips, and songs of joy and praise in our hearts and voices. My prayer is that I may meet all my friends on earth there. Kind reader, meet me there.

In conclusion I give some verses that I have written for the comfort of those who are afflicted like myself. I hope if any such may happen to read them, they may be the

means of cheering their hearts. Dear fellow-sufferers, our Saviour feels for us in our afflictions, and in his own good time and in his own good way will bring us relief.

BE NOT AFRAID, FOR JESUS IS WITH THEE.

Is this thy time of trouble,
Look up, look up on high,
To Him who now would succor thee,
Who now would draw thee nigh.

He sees thy soul is clinging
To something here below,
And wants to make thy roving heart
His greater love to know.

Look up, look up to Jesus,
A present help is He.
He has been such to others,
He will be such to thee.

Is this thy time of doubting?
Do fearful thoughts arise?
Lift up thy heart to Jesus,
He will not thee despise.

Think of His great, his wondrous love,
Think of His glorious name,
Think why He shed his precious blood
And soon thy doubts must flee.

List to the Saviour's gentle voice,
"Fear not, for I am near,
"And never will forsake my child
"While he is lingering here."

Is this thy time of sickness?
E'en now doubt not his love.
Thy Father wants to make thee think
More of thy home above.

That home where no more sickness
No doubts, no troubles, rise,
But where thy Father, God, will wipe
The tears from off thine eyes.

Those whom He loves be Christians,
Thou wilt not then repine,
But let thine aching head and heart
On Jesus's breast recline.

In every time of trouble,
Of doubting or of pain,
Lift up thy heart to Jesus,
Pray yet, and yet again.

He shares in all thy sorrows,
He feels for all thy grief,
And though He sends affliction now,
He soon will send relief.

He watches o'er thee in thy bed,
'Twas He who placed thee there,
That He might purge away the sin,
And thou His image bear.

Canst thou not from these depths of woe
Call out to Him for aid?
To Him on whose dear heart we know
Our cares and griefs are laid?

Oh, yes, he bore our sorrows here,
He knoweth all our pain;
His voice can fill our hearts with cheer,
And make them sing again.

Then why, my soul, art thou cast down?
Oh, why dost thou repine?
An earthly cross, a heavenly crown,
Shalt thou exchange in time.

Rejoice, then, oh thou suffering one;
Rejoice! Be not cast down.
Those who for Christ here bear the Cross
Above shall wear the Crown.

THE END.

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